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SUBJECT: FM Calls for GCC-Iran Nuclear Talks, Urges Attendance at Arab Summit

¶1. (U) Summary: All the Qatari local dailies and Al Jazeera provided prominent coverage for a lecture delivered by Qatar's Premier and Foreign Minister Hamad Bin Jassim A Thani (HBJ) on March 9 on Gulf security at the onclusion of the seventh Doha Cultural Festival. HBJ advocated direct talks between the Gulf states and Iran on the nuclear issue, and urged fellow Arab leaders to attend the upcoming Arab League summit in Damascus. He asserted that Arab nations should not boycott "their ummit" in Damascus, even if they disagreed with the hosts, particularly since they attended the Anapolis conference. He also discussed U.S.-Qatar relations, noting that disagreements with friends were natural, but that the United States has been "exploiting Arab disunity" to serve its purposes, and "Israel dares to kill Palestinians again because the Arabs are divided." HBJ also touched on Yemen's status within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the rights of foreign workers in Qatar. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Local Headlines:

- ¶1. The Security of the Gulf is the responsibility of its people
- ¶2. HBJ: We will not allow anyone to put the Gulf in a new military adventure
- ¶3. HBJ: Boycotting Damascus's summit is not beneficial
- ¶4. HBJ: We must talk
- ¶5. PM for direct talks with Iran on nuclear issue
- ¶6. Alliances are crucial for Gulf region
- ¶7. The Gulf needs a security program that is based on partnership and collective responsibility

¶3. (U) Al Jazeera:

Al Jazeera's Arabic channel, in its hourly news bulletins on March 10, focused on the Prime Minister's comments with regard to the Arab summit and his call for direct talks between GCC countries and Iran on the nuclear issue.

¶4. (U) BLOCK QUOTES:

All papers ran full page coverage of the lecture and almost all carried the same information. Following is the coverage of the English daily "Gulf Times," which was the closest to the Arabic dailies in terms of complete and accurate information.

"Alliances are Crucial for Gulf Region"

Semi-Independent English daily "Gulf Times", (03/10)

The Prime Minister delivered a speech yesterday on "Security in the Gulf" at the end of the seventh Doha Cultural Festival. On the security of the Gulf, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim said it was the responsibility of its own people "but some alliances are needed to protect such a vital region" in the world. "If something bad happened to a country, the ruler would be the first to be blamed. His people would ask him why he did not take the necessary measures to avoid such a disaster."
"Coalitions are known to exist since the beginning of humanity, and it is the basic right of any country to have alliances with others, in accordance with national interests." The Premier, who is also the Foreign Minister, said that the Gulf States must avoid unilateral positions and "be mature enough to have a collective voice" at international forums. "Mistakes are taking place, as in the rest of the world, and we are not shy to say that but we take care to correct these mistakes."

He confirmed Qatari participation at the Arab leaders' summit planned in Damascus in the last week of this month "regardless of disagreements with the hosts," saying that the Syrians were only hosting the meeting and they did not own it. He said that boycotting the summit did not serve any purpose. "Arab states ran one after another to attend the Annapolis talks, so it is better to do the same at their leaders' summit. "We never doubt the loyalty of the Arab leaders towards their people, and therefore they have to speak frankly with each other to solve problems. Instead of taking up 120 subjects, it is better to choose the important ones and deal with them."

On the Iranian nuclear dossier, the Prime Minister said Tehran had kept on insisting the program was peaceful, but the West did not agree with that position. "We believe that we have to conduct direct dialogue with Tehran in order to understand why they have to develop a nuclear program and for what purpose. Iran is a key state in the region and it has never invaded us. It is true that some people view Iran with suspicion but it has not reached the level of

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tensions."

On Qatari-U.S. positions on different issues, especially regarding the Palestinian cause and the Iranian nuclear program, he said: "Naturally we have different views from our American friends but this is always the nature of the friendship."

Asked about the "Islamic reaction" to the Danish cartoons, he said that Qatar was ready to join a "unified position" of taking economic actions against Denmark. "If such a unified position was impossible, we should not issue threats of this sort in the first place. If you cannot carry out your threat, it is better to remain silent. I hope that the West understood that the Prophet Muhammad is a holy figure for us. If they don't believe in him it is up to them."

On the withdrawal of Qatari troops from the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), he said that Doha had clarified from the beginning that Qatar's mission would be for a limited period and it had nothing to do with any possible development in south Lebanon. The U.S. has been exploiting the disunity among the Arabs to serve its purposes, and Israel dares to kill Palestinians again because the Arab ranks are divided, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim said.

On the role of Yemen in Gulf security, he said that Yemen's entry to the GCC would strengthen the council, but there were regulations that should be followed, including amendments in Yemen's internal laws. "It took the six-member GCC 25 years to unify the majority of the laws in our countries," he said.

When asked about the law protecting the contractual rights of foreign workers, he said: "We cannot call expatriates a minority anymore and the relevant ministries are working hard to protect their rights. No doubt we need them for our development process. The workers' contracts should be fully respected but on the other hand, they (workers) have to respect our laws and traditions."

On the de-pegging of the Qatari riyal from the U.S. dollar, he said that such a decision was not easy and it was under study, and "I hope the GCC states take a unified position in this matter."

Asked if the GCC citizens felt that their rights were protected, the Prime Minister said: "Talking about Qatar, statistics show that during the last 10 years, citizens won 92% of the court cases filed against government bodies. Naturally we are not a mistake-free country, but I can speak about a strong judiciary that is open to everyone."

15. (SBU) COMMENT: HBJ did not break new ground in Qatari policy. His public comments highlighting different perspectives with the United States on the nuclear threat from Iran and the Palestinian situation are in all likelihood designed with Arab and Iranian audiences in mind.

Ratney